

Hollywood's Class Warfare By A. O. SCOTT

A.O. Scott searching for some class consciousness in this year's films (and Franzen's novel).

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THE idea of the universal middle class is a pervasive expression of American egalitarianism — and perhaps the only one left. In politics the middle has all but swallowed up the ends. Tax cuts aimed at the wealthy and social programs that largely benefit the poor must always be presented as, above all, good for the middle class, a group that thus seems to include nearly everyone. It is also a group that is, at least judging from the political rhetoric of the last 20 years, perennially in trouble: shrinking, forgotten, frustrated, afraid of falling down and scrambling to keep up.

In the movies, which exist partly to smooth over the rough patches in our collective life, the same basic picture takes on a more benign coloration. Middle-classness is a norm, an ideal and a default setting. For a long time most commercial entertainments not set in the distant past or in some science-fiction superhero fantasyland have taken place in a realm of generic ease and relative affluence. Everyone seems to have a cool job, a fabulous kitchen, great clothes and a nice car. Nothing too fancy or showy, of course, and also nothing too clearly marked with real-world signs of status or its absence. The characters in, let's say, a typical romantic comedy or family drama are blander, better-looking reflections of what the members of the audience are imagined to imagine themselves to be: hard workers and eager shoppers, neither greedy nor needy. Those airbrushed mirror images draw

from a common well of (reasonable) aspirations and (mild) anxieties. The people on screen are ambitious but not obsessively so, educated but not snobbish about it. Mostly they want to be happy, and we want them to be happy because we want to be happy too.

Right at the moment, though, we may be feeling a little grumpy, and otherwise inoffensive movies (“How do You Know,” for instance, or “Love and Other Drugs”) can look more clueless than playful in their genial assumptions of material comfort and financial security. More than that, the cheery, harmonious universalism that Hollywood has promoted and relied upon for so long seems out of tune with the surrounding cacophony. And lo and behold, the screen suddenly bristles with something that looks like class consciousness.

Mark Zuckerberg in “The Social Network” takes on the ultra-privileged Winklevoss twins. The real-life Micky Ward in [“The Fighter”](#) takes on the world and his own family, just like the fictitious protagonists of [“Winter’s Bone”](#) and [“The Town.”](#) [Denzel Washington](#), a heroic working stiff in [“Unstoppable,”](#) takes on a mighty train (and the corporate fat cats more concerned with the bottom line than with public safety). A howl of anti-Wall Street rage sounds through Charles Ferguson’s documentary [“Inside Job”](#) and, more bombastically if less coherently, through [Oliver Stone’s](#) “Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps.” To the barricades!

But — if I may sloganize further — which side are you on? There is no doubt that in the past year, through seasons of economic malaise and political anger, there has seemed to be a lot more division than consensus in American life. And this friction is often articulated and analyzed in what sounds like the language of class. Not in the old European (or, God forbid, socialist) sense of the word. The history of the world might be, as [Karl Marx](#) said, the history of class struggle but the history of American exceptionalism insists otherwise. So we have instead, at this moment in history, a culture war, a battle between populism and elitism, a sectional conflict between the coasts and the heartland and ideological dispute between liberals and conservatives.

This confused Hobbesian state of belligerence, a prominent feature of the media and political landscape for at least the past decade (though rarely reflected in mass-marketed

past decade (though rarely reflected in mass marketed movies), is persuasively sketched in [Jonathan Franzen's "Freedom,"](#) surely the year's most talked- and written-about novel. Its main characters are the members of a proudly, perhaps smugly, right-thinking — which is to say left-leaning — Minnesota family whose veneer of social responsibility and liberal niceness is shattered by external fissures and internal pressures. Walter and Patty Berglund are do-gooders and gentrifiers, nutritionally and environmentally conscious NPR listeners (and readers of The New York Times) who have a knack for inspiring rage and resentment in their neighbors and at least one of their children. If Walter and Patty are unable to refute the accusation that they think they're better than everyone else, it's partly because they do.

The sense of class conflict that ripples through Mr. Franzen's novel is all the more invidious and unsettling because nearly all of it takes place among neighbors, friends and family members. Class warfare, in other words, is carried out as a civil war between segments of the same class, who are only slightly caricatured in the novel's sympathetic satire. [Rush Limbaugh](#) on the radio in one house — the one with the big vinyl-sided addition and the S.U.V. in the driveway — versus [Garrison Keillor](#) in the other, a rehabbed old Victorian where the boxy old Volvo has recently been replaced by a Prius.

Maybe in much of America these warring clans don't live in such immediate proximity, but neither are they as conveniently divided as we might sometimes suppose, or as a movie like "The Kids Are All Right" might make it seem. Nic and Jules, the lesbian parents played by [Annette Bening](#) and [Julianne Moore](#), are cut from the same cloth as the Berglunds, but they exist mainly in a world of the like-minded, spared the kind of hostility that Walter and Patty habitually inspire.

Someone once said that there are no red states or blue states, just united states, which may be true except for the united part. That, at least, is Mr. Franzen's insight: that disunion is a much more diffuse and intimate condition than our political expressions of it might lead us to suppose. (And this leads him back, eventually, to a quiet rediscovery of the basic truth that we're all in this together.)

Or, to put it another way: Class is everywhere and nowhere. The feeling of class antagonism is what allows the Mark Zuckerberg of “The Social Network,” a child of suburban prosperity, a graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy and a student at Harvard, to feel that he is excluded from the highest reaches of social distinction, an underdog with something to prove. That same feeling percolates in Micky Ward’s Lowell, a few years and an hour’s drive from Zuckerberg’s Cambridge but a different world altogether. There Micky’s girlfriend, Charlene, is regarded by his sisters as superior and stuck-up — a virtual Berglund, even though what they call her is an “[MTV](#) skank” — because she briefly went to college and believes that Micky can rise above his hardscrabble circumstances.

Micky — like Ree Dolly, the Missouri teenager in “Winter’s Bone” — wants out, just as surely as Zuckerberg wants in. What they want into and out of are the closed systems defined by custom and kinship that demarcate the ends of the social spectrum. The special status of the Winklevoss twins, or of the shadowy bankers in “[Wall Street](#)” (or indeed of the couple in Jonathan Dee’s novel “The Privileges,” speaking of works of fiction by authors named Jonathan) is defined not only by wealth, but also by a vestigial mystique of aristocracy.

A countervailing mystique clings to the streets of Lowell — and Boston’s Charlestown neighborhood in “The Town” — and to the hollows of Appalachia and the Ozarks. The defining common trait of these places is not so much poverty or criminality, though these certainly flourish, as tribalism. Family ties and longstanding traditions, which in the modern world of “Winter’s Bone” and “The Town” have come to include methamphetamine production and bank robbing, are what complicate and sometimes doom any effort to escape. Jennifer Lawrence’s Ree Dolly wants to join the Army. [Ben Affleck](#)’s Doug MacRay in “The Town” wants to run away with the pretty bank employee who was once his hostage. [Mark Wahlberg](#)’s Micky Ward wants a shot at the title.

What they all really want is entrée into the middle class, which is why these movies can set them up as objects of audience sympathy and identification. The people around them are variously scary, comical, noble and grotesque, to be

pitied, feared and wondered at. But they are consistently exotic, always other.

This is not to say that they are unrecognizable or unrealistic, or that the long-overdue discovery of the white underclass on the part of filmmakers is not a welcome and interesting development. (It is also interesting that, in novels, in political coverage and in movies not starring Mr.

Washington, race and class tend to be treated as mutually exclusive concepts, rather than as strands in the same contradictory knot.) But the implicit assumption that the viewer, whatever his or her actual social circumstances, belongs in the middle — where the most sympathetic characters also long to be — is stronger than the will of any particular writer or director.

And this same assumption is at work in movies — and, especially, television series — that explore the fear of dropping out of the middle class rather than the impulse to climb into it. In John Wells's "Company Men," a brutal chronicle of corporate downsizing, the characters face the loss of jobs, income and, much more frighteningly, the collapse of their identities. It may be possible to claw your way from the middle to the top, but it is not as if the comforts of family and locale that hold Ree Dolly and Micky Ward in place are waiting for anyone on the way down. The battered petty-bourgeois breadwinners in "Hung" and "Breaking Bad," for instance, find their way into stereotypical professions of the underclass (sex work and drug dealing), but only as a desperate means of staying in place. They do not become part of a culture of poverty, but rather parodic, degraded specimens of suburban individualism.

Should we laugh, cry, or envy them? It's hard to say. Back in the last Depression the class divide was also, characteristically, a genre divide: films about the poor were crime stories or melodramas, while comedy was the favored (though not exclusive) province of the rich. Think of [James Cagney](#) and his fellow scrappy slum kids on one hand, and the gowned and tuxedoed inhabitants of an [Ernst Lubitsch](#) society comedy (like "[Design for Living](#)") on the other.

Dramas of poverty are more marginal than they used to be; they tend to occupy the art houses rather than the multiplexes. Comedies about the very rich are rarer and are

multiplexes. Comedies about the very rich are rare, and are often camouflaged as stories about folks like us: “Sex and The City 2” is a notable recent example, since its luxury-swamped characters were not made to seem exotic at all, just blessed with taste, luck and money.

Which is not, at least in the movies, the same as class, since taste and money are things all of us can — and should, and surely want to — acquire. For the price of a movie ticket, perhaps.